***“Doctor Atomic”***

Father Thomas Merton of Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, was the most influential Roman Catholic spiritual writer of the twentieth century. His kaleidoscopic ministry included many books, diaries, poems and letters: and by the early 1960’s he had become a pivotal voice in the International Peace Movement. Those word of his which we have just heard tonight are just as relevant today as they were 60 years ago. The sobering thought is that we have paid them little heed. What he calls the ‘subtle and demonic threat of global suicide’ hangs over us still; ramped up in this millenial generation by the heated nuclear rhetoric being exchanged between America and North Korea. Merton nevertheless understood that despite the arms race, and the commercial impetus that goes with it, the nuclear tendency was and remains essentially a *spiritual* problem – as much as the complete apathy which has become our habitual response to it.

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Although we have other urgent challenges ahead of us, such as the inexorable advance of climate change, we live our lives for the most part unengaged by the knowledge that a global arsenal of nuclear weapons – 15,000 of them to be precise - exists which could be launched within minutes and destroy our planet many times over. In the 70-plus years since the first atomic bomb was detonated some 2,000 feet above the citizens of Hiroshima, the proliferation of these instruments of apocalyptic annihilation has continued unabated: with the most dominant Western nations attempting to control the nuclear aspirations of those it considers to be rogue states. Hypocrisy and dubious morality abound. Merton makes a point that is even more self-evidently true than it was 60 years ago: as our technological world speeds up, no one *is,* or *has* the capacity to be, in control. Least of all the political leaders of states and empires who are trying to construct some kind of choreography out of what is in reality a macabre dance of death. As repeated Hitlers, Stalins and lesser tyrants rise and fall; as political movements such as fascism, communism, nationalism and populism come and go; so the insecurity of the globe increases exponentially.

In the Greek legend of Pandora, it is the gods who give a beautiful woman (it is always a woman isn’t it, who is associated with evil in most creation myths) a jar or box of plagues, wars, famines and other delectable evils to unleash upon the world. Once released into the atmosphere, they can never be recaptured or safely confined again. The Greek gods act as arbitrary judges of mankind’s behaviour: though from a spectacularly immoral standpoint as regards their own. But from a more humanist perspective, the situation might best be described in these words from ‘***King Lear’:***

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,*

*They kill us for their sport.*

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the Judaeo-Christian God, the fate of humankind is self-chosen through their own free will: though clouded by the impulsive passions which play havoc with a fallen world. A situation summed up in these lines from Shakespeare’s ‘***Measure for Measure’:***

*But man, proud man,*

*Dressed in a little brief authority,*

*Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven*

*As makes the angels weep.*

The codename of the bomb that fell on Hiroshima at 8.15 am on August 6th, 1945, was ‘Little Boy’. The second atom bomb, directed at Nagasaki at 11.02 am on August 9th was nicknamed ‘Fat Man’. One of the more grotesque aspects of the human – or in this case inhumane – imagination. But there has always been a tendency to treat war as war-games. Just as, like many boys before him and since, the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson would assemble his toy soldiers and troops on the counterpane when confined to the barracks of the sickroom.

However, when we read the life-story of ‘Dr Atomic’ himself, J Robert Oppenheimer, who led the Manhattan Project which first harnessed atomic energy for military purposes, we see a soul on a journey which was to involve great personal cost. His politics in the 1930’s made him more than aware that Hitler could develop a nuclear weapon. So Oppenheimer, together with many scientists who had escaped fascist regimes in Europe, worked at the Los Alamos laboratory to produce what came to be known as the H-bomb. However, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Oppenheimer opposed any further development of the nuclear bomb on account of the scale of the destruction. He was subsequently stripped of his security clearance, forbidden to do any further work on nuclear energy, and even declared a communist. In spite of eventually receiving recognition for his work in 1963, he continued to support the international control of atomic energy from 1946 until his death. In many ways it is a conversion story which very clearly illustrates the moral dilemma posed by so much scientific progress: its use either for good or ill. The paradox of potential is that it can lead in either direction.

One story which gets considerably less coverage than Japan but which is more troubling for the environment, is that of the atoll between Australia and Hawaii comprising the Marshall Islands. These islands are still uninhabitable since the huge US Hydrogen Bomb tests were carried out there during the Cold War Arms Race between 1946 and 1958. On the 1st March, 1954, a 15-megatonne Bravo Test detonated an explosion a thousand times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. To date only 1 of the 60-or-so islands in the archipelago –Runit - has been cleaned up. The majority of residents cannot return after the prolonged sequence of 67 nuclear tests which eventually closed down in 1958. Throughout this period all the traditional customs and skills of the native populations were lost, including all their cultural history. To this day the islanders are still waiting for a fair and just settlement of their claims for compensation. But of greatest concern ecologically is the large concrete dome at the end of Runit Island. Built between 1977 and 1980 by soldiers whose health was subsequently damaged, the dome contains radioactive material including plutonium, material which is now being released into the atmosphere and the ocean because of the cracks opening in the sarcophagus disc. Currently this site has a much higher level of radiation than Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl or Fukushima had.

Fr Thomas Merton believed we were ‘unwrapping the vivid symbols of the last book of the New Testament.’ But rather like the contents of Pandora’s box, once unwrapped - never forgotten. The word ‘Apocalypse’ has acquired a uniquely doom-laden, terminal echo all of its own. Yet its meaning, ‘that ***which is revealed’***, is more like an unfolding of history, or a plan laid bare. The *Book of Revelation* has been accorded many strange and lurid interpretations depending on how close each generation has felt to the end of all things. Like the punishment of the gods, the seven angels with the seven plagues and the angels with the seven bowls of God’s wrath *(Rev 16),* are all of a piece with the sense of inescapable destruction: here visited upon the peoples of earth not by man’s own stupidity, but by a divine force of purgation determined to obliterate evil once and for all.

Destruction, purification even, on such an epic and universal scale has sometimes been referred to by theologians as *‘vastation’*.The word carries with it a bleak resonance of total emptiness and non-being: a lacuna of un-selved souls seemingly unable to reach Redemption. Perhaps such a *‘vastation’* is what we might see in a mirror were we to detect a strange multitude standing behind us. A multitude we might recognise neither as humans nor demons, but as something more disturbingly in-between. Halfway between beings of sentient flesh, and discarnate entities of spectral shadow. At any rate caught in a desolate spiritual limbo into which humankind has found themselves cast; having brought upon themselves the judgment of universal suicide, and the judgment of a God of goodness who has witnessed them wantonly destroy his creation. Worldly destruction is terrible enough: but spiritual mass destruction is of another order entirely.

*‘Then the Angel said to me: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy, because the time is near. Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy’.*

***(Revelation 22: 10-11)***

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*Hiroshima Memorial Service, 6th August 2019*